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The Church that Changes the World

by

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The Church that Changes the World.

Text: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." John 12:32.

Jesus announces and explains His popularity. It is a strange crowd that throngs Him. Perhaps the people have heard that He has lifted Lazarus from the tomb, and they have come to see One Who can raise the dead. Yonder is a group of bigoted Pharisees, proud, pompous, canting, digusted at Christ's popularity, and saying among themselves: "Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after Him!" There are certain Greeks whose curiosity has been aroused, and who would see Jesus, and who, led by Phillip and Andrew, have come to have their desires gratified. Around Him are His devoted disciples. To all these He says: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." It was an amazing statement. It is a tremendous claim.

It carries us back to an earlier hour in Christ's ministry, to that night Nicodemus, a distinguished member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, came seeking light. To him Jesus said: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Nicodemus came doubting, and went away wondering. He came in pride, and he went in humility. He came in the night, and he went in the light that never was on land or sea. "So must the Son of Man be lifted up." "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." Christ here discovers to us that which gives to His church the power to change the world.

CHANGING THE WORLD.

The church is to change the world. The world needs changing. It is not what it ought to be. Christ is not satisfied with things as they are. They can be improved. They must be improved. It can be made a happier, a safer, and a sweeter world. We are not to take injustice and greed and crime and vice and pauperism as matters of course. Conditions can be changed. Evil has no right to exist. Christ came to make this a cleaner and a safer world, and the church is to carry on the work He started. The church is not to whine over evil and prate of heaven.

It is not to compromise with evil and try to make the best out of the worst. It is to make the worst into the best. Christ meant His church to be a power in the present, and not merely a ticket window for eternity.

The church is to assault hoary systems of iniquity, to assail effete conservatism whose only asset is the memory of a long-past respectability. It is to resist evil and retard selfishness and smash caste and become the merciless protagonist of hate. It is to march down on organized greed and political lust and social hypocrisy. It is to wage ceaseless war on the colossal avarice which fills its coffers with blood money, and on the ambition which sates itself with the people's shame. It is to champion the cause of the weak, and hearken to the cry of the distressed. It is to bind up the broken-hearted, and comfort the sorrowing, to be pitiful, and merciful to all who feel friendless. The church has something to do. Its program is glorious. Its enterprise is peerless. The church is vastly more than an aggregation of respectability sauntering in and sallying out of sacred precincts on Sabbath morning.

The church is not here to admire itself. It is not a mutual admiration society gazing with glowing and undisguised delight at its own well-advertised virtues and abundantly displayed charms. It is here to change the world. It is not to apologize for its existence nor explain its origin nor defend itself against attack. Its business is not to observe memorials and declaim about how things used to be. It does not exist for purposes of ornamentation. Christ was not decorating society when He organized the church. The church was meant to make itself felt in all life. It was to be advancing, conquering, resistless.

Is the church changing the world, or the world changing the church? Is it the church in the world, or the world in the church? Is the church moving with the march of victory, or is it timid, apologetic, distrustful of itself, solicitous for the future, and gravely alarmed at the perils which seem to threaten its existence? It may have recruits, but if it takes the Almighty to distinguish the sheep from the goats, the recruiting station is doing a poor business. The main question is not the number, but the quality of the recruits. Too many church members are like the man whose wife was told that her husband was a member of such and such a church. She replied: "I have been living with him for twenty years, and this is the first time I ever knew that he was a member of any church!" Evi-

dently a church full of members of that kind could not make much progress in changing the world.

It is a lamentable fact that many churches are merely trying to hold their own. Their energies are absorbed in the effort to preserve themselves against decay. Theirs is a struggle for existence. They have lost the martial note. They have ceased to have any military movements. They are afraid they will become extinct. Additions about keep pace with deaths and removals. Such churches are not popular. People are not attracted by them. The procession is all the other way. This is not what Christ meant His church to be.

The church is not advancing as it should. Those first disciples turned the world upside-down. Nothing is upset nowadays. It would not be proper. The church politely steps out of the way whenever it sees anything coming. It profusely apologizes whenever it seems to offend anybody. No offense was intended. It sings war hymns in most pacific postures. It asks: "Am I a soldier of the cross?", and the world replies: "No, not a soldier—not that anyone has discovered." Meanwhile, all around the church are conditions which cry to high heaven for relief. People are unreached, untaught, unled,

weary and lonely and homesick. Many of them say the world does not care, and when they do come to the church, sometimes they get into the wrong pew, as did a man recently in this church. The pew-renter found the intruder, and fixing him with a frosty look, said: "I rent this pew!" Fortunately the victim was a preacher, and was not alienated from the church, for he saw that the joke was on the church and not on the devil.

I do not mean to say that the church is a failure. It is far from being a failure. It is the most valuable institution society has. If the church fails, society is doomed. Imperfect as it is, the church is the most valuable institution society possesses, but it is not measuring up to Christ's standard. He meant it to be the most popular institution in the world, and it can be, if it will, what Christ wants it to be.

THE ASSET OF A POPULAR CHURCH.

How? Christ Himself tells us when He says: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." The church is to change the world by attracting it. It is not a campaign of denunciation and abuse. People are to be drawn, not driven. The world is not converted by craft or force or logic or

wealth. Christ introduced a method that was revolutionary. He proposed to conquer His enemies with love. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" The way to rescue a man who is walking along the dizzy brink of a dangerous precipice is not to fire a cannon or explode a mine, but to woo him from the path of peril with a love song. This is Christ's method for saving sinners.

The church is to have drawing power. It is to be popular—the most popular thing on earth. Perhaps some feel that the church should not concern itself with popularity. It is a worldly spirit. The church should do as it thinks best, whether this pleases or offends; but there is no merit in an unattractive church. There is no virtue in making religion uninteresting. There is no charm in preaching that becomes long drawn out penance. There is no saving power in music whose sole approach to harmony is when it ceases. The church should be popular, attractive, until people are drawn to it and love it and crowd its doors and throng its courts and give it their best and live for it, and if needs be, die for it.

Christ has no zeal for an unpopular church. He is not seeking for a small congregation. To be sure, when He was here on earth, His disciples were few,

and once at Jacob's well he preached a great sermon to an audience of one; but He says: "I will draw all men unto me." He said: "Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, that my house may be full." The church must not be satisfied with empty pews. It is not enough for it to say: "If the people want to come, they can. If they are the elect, they will. The bell has rung and the door is open. Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. We are the elect." There is cold comfort in that sort of a gospel for a soul in the far country. Christ said to His disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." The mission of the church is world conquest. It cannot be satisfied with a state of unpopularity. It must not solace itself with self-elected martyrdom. It must strive to be popular.

Popularity is what the average church most wants. There is nothing that makes it so happy as a full house. It seeks a minister who can draw, and is willing to pay him any price if he can crowd the church. It hires a choir, and measures its success by its popularity. When people are turned away from the services because the church is packed to the door, the church con-

cludes that the kingdom is rapidly advancing. When the gate receipts are satisfactory and the offerings are large, the organization is successful. This means that church success is being measured by material, and not by spiritual standards.

What is it that some churches will not do for popularity? They do not hesitate at anything to get a crowd. All sorts of cheap sensations are resorted to. Things are tolerated which are not only empty of the religious motive, but which are foreign to the gospel purpose. Christ is wounded in the house of His friends, just for a crowd. And many of these fake novelties in the end prove to be a liability rather than an asset. They are like Jonah's gourd that grew in the night and died in the day. Novelty soon wears off, and the popularity bought at this price is not only hard to get, but harder to keep.

These are conditions which are all too common. Outside the church is a barrier of prejudice or of indifference or of ignorance, and inside the church is a coterie of respectability captured and held by a stern sense of duty. The trouble is, the church has been seeking popularity either in the wrong way or for wrong purposes. It has been seeking it for selfish ends. Instead of serving the community, it would exploit the

community that it may serve the church. It has been seeking to draw a crowd by worldly methods, by methods which betray Christ and discredit His gospel. In either case the church deserves to fail.

CHRIST THE MAGNET.

Jesus names Himself as the asset of a popular church. "I will draw all men unto me." What a word from the lips of One soon to be crucified, and Who sees already the cross emerging from the shadows which line His path, and Who hears the Place of the Skull calling for its victim! There He stands, the loneliest man in the world. Soon He will be lonelier, for He will feel Himself forsaken of God as well as of man. His disciples are few. His friends are fickle. One day they shout: "Hosanna!" the next: "Crucify Him!" He is doomed. Soon His body will be in the tomb. And yet, there He stands with perfect confidence and absolute assurance, saying: "I will draw all men unto me." History declares He was not mistaken.

It is Christ Who gives to the church power to win and change the world, and the church makes a fatal blunder when it turns from Him to some lesser magnet. Sometimes it has turned to the pulpit, and depended on the

preacher to draw. The pulpit is important, but the main thing is not rhetoric and oratory, or learning, or personality. Christ must be preached in the right way. It is not the preacher so much as it is his message, and the message is best which is fullest of Christ. Once I was a guest at a dinner party where the dishes on the table were all silver, but I did not notice that the food tasted any better. I have eaten from paper plates around a camp fire a meal that had greater relish. It is not the sermon. It is the message. It is not the preacher. It is the Christ.

Sometimes the churches look to the choir loft for help. Music has charms, but I have known high-priced choirs to sing to empty pews. Sometimes the church has looked to the building. The officers have said: "If we could but have a fine church we would have a crowd." And some of these magnificent temples, these stately and grand cathedrals that cost millions of money and were decades in building, have turned out to be the sombre tombs of religion.

There are those who think it is money the church most needs. They have faith in the almighty dollar. It is a commercial age. Money is valuable if used aright. But money is the poorest and cheapest substitute for the liv-

ing Christ. Churches are neither popular nor powerful because they are rich. There is a great lesson in that story of Thomas á Kempis. A pampered dignitary of the church, richly dressed with gold chains and jewels and riding in a handsome carriage, said to Thomas: "You see the church no longer needs to say with the apostles, 'Silver and gold have I none,' to which the poor monk replied: "Neither can the church any more say with the apostles, to the poor and the needy, 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk'!"

It is Jesus the world wants. There is something about Him that is wondrously attractive. He meets human needs. When one is hungry, whether he be rich or poor, he wants bread. When he is thirsty, he wants water. Christ is the bread of life. He is the living water. He ministers to the elemental needs of the human soul. All that the church needs to make it popular is to be thoroughly and sincerely Christian, to be faithfully and fearlessly loyal to Christ, to have faith enough in Him to be willing to risk everything on the asset of His drawing power. Then it makes comparatively little difference whether the church is rich or poor. It can use money or poverty, a cathedral or a mission, for Christ is the

magnet for weary hearts. The house may be poor, the preacher plain, the service simple, but if Christ be there, all is glorious.

Let us not forget that it is the crucified Christ Who draws. He says: "And I, if I be lifted up—" There can be no doubt as to His meaning. "This he said signifying what death he should die." Christ had no hope of drawing the world by wonderful teaching or a beautiful life. He knew that He must go to the cross. Calvary is the magnet. It is a church loyal to the crucified Christ, loyal to the atonement, loyal to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, that changes the world into the kingdom of God.

It is the crucified Christ that was the theme of apostolic preaching. Those early apostles went up and down the world telling men about a Savior Who loved them enough to die for them. One day a poisoned arrow entered the body of King Edward I of England. His beautiful young wife, Eleanor, placed her sweet lips to the wound, and sucked the poison from his body. She did it because she loved him. But Christ did more than that to show us His love. He died for us. "Greater love hath no man than this."

And yet there are preachers today whose sermons are empty of the cross,

who regard Calvary as a dull theme, who say that the gospel of blood is out of date, and who are unwilling to accept, and who are slow to preach, the supernatural. What have they left? A little ethical rose water, a sermonette on civic righteousness or domestic duty. No wonder people are not attracted! Take the cross of Christ out of Christianity, and there is no power left to change the world. What the church needs most to-day is to get back to the hour Christ died on the cross. There walls of prejudice topple. There indifference disappears and ignorance breaks up.

Be it ours to lift up the crucified Christ! At the coronation of Queen Victoria, those in charge arranged for the stately service to close with Handel's Oratorio of the Messiah. They told the young queen that she was to remain seated, but that the clergy and the nobles and the commons would stand. When the Halleluia Chorus started, the young queen was visibly affected. When the great choir sang: "And He shall reign forever and ever," the tears were seen to trickle down her cheeks, and when the great line stormed through the Abbey: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," she lifted the crown from her head and rising to her feet, stood weeping in the presence of

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Him Who was not only her King but her Redeemer.

This is what I crave most to do in my work as a preacher,—to hold up the crucified Christ. And what I long for most in my church is that it shall be made up of people who are crucified with Christ. I do not covet a church that is the largest or the richest. I do not covet one whose constituency represents the culture and the influence of the community, but I do covet for my church absolute and unfailing loyalty to Him Who hung and died between two thieves, and Who loves this lost world back into the arms of God.

A man who had been a great sinner told how he was saved. He said: "I crept to the feet of Jesus, and to my astonishment, He did not scold me, for He knew that I had been scolded enough; and He did not pity me, nor did He give me advice, for He knew that I already had enough of these; but He put His arms around me and loved me; and when the morning arose, I was a new man!"